

Enhancing Growth in Parents as a Way of Promoting Family Life and Youth Health

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The important link between family life and youth health and wellbeing is widely acknowledged in research and literature. Equally, it is noted that the nature of relationships youngsters have with their parents, necessarily impact on the psychological wellbeing of parents.

In the majority, current parent education programs focus on younger children, and largely advise parents on child development and child management. Depending on the theoretical orientation of the program, either the child's troublesome behaviour is focus for change or parents are required to change their behaviour or parenting techniques. The limitations of these approaches have been noted. While prescriptive parent education programs are clearly inappropriate where teenagers are the focus, few suitable group programs have been developed with a practical alternative orientation.

This paper reports on one form of parent education being developed at Springvale Community Health Centre which serves to explore the practical relevance and benefits of a family systems approach in support-group programs for parents of adolescent children. Essentially, the family systems approach locates the parent-teenager relationship in the context of the family. Using key notions such as context, connectedness, continuity and change an attempt is made in the group to facilitate personal growth and the emergence of an alternative vision of family dynamics and parenting relationships.

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And to know the place for the first time*
(T.S. Eliot, "Little Gidding")

*We got here through the grace of our parents.
We get by with the help of our friends.
We go on for the future of our children.*
(Ferber A. et al. The Book of Family Therapy, 1972)

Background

The link between youth health and family life is widely acknowledged in research and literature (Poole & Evans, 1989; Reynolds & Rob, 1988; Silverberg & Steinberg, 1987). Siddique and D'Arcy (1984:470) state:

Family stress is of central importance in adolescence, having significant mental-health consequences... Thus, any dissatisfactions with the quality of family life such as communication problems with parents, fear of their disapproval, lack of intimacy and intra-family conflict, are likely to be viewed with great alarm and may be expressed in an emotionally charged manner.

The critical element in this link between youth health and family life is the quality of the parent-teen

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relationship. A poor relationship invariably has unhappy consequences for the young person, as well as for the parent. In this situation, 'it is often difficult to determine whether the family is capable of improvement or whether the young person needs to have a life independent of the family' (McDonald, 1992:25). This is an area for urgent research.

The increasing sense of alienation and homelessness experienced by today's young people may also have much to do with the increasing fragmentation of the family and its isolation from the immediate community. 'We have allowed the family unit to become so private and isolated', says Edgar (1989:5), 'that its links with the wider social structures and processes have been obscured. A sense of isolation and pointlessness results'.

From the above, it is evident that intervention in the family (or more specifically in family relationships)

can be a strategy with the potential for significant and positive impact on youth health and wellbeing. The 1989 Youth Health Forum of the World Health Organisation was even more specific in suggesting that since parents are often the most significant agents in the lives of young people, **parent support** may be viewed as a strategic form of intervention towards promoting youth health.

Offering parent support in a **group setting** is a well established practice. But more importantly, this setting offers the possibilities for harnessing the potency and therapeutic benefits of the group process (Forsythe, 1990).

Support group programs for parents of teenagers

Parenting or parent education programs used locally are many and varied. These include STEP, Parenting Skills Program, Responsive Parenting,

Planning Happy Families and Parent Effectiveness Training. While the more popular programs have come in for criticism and comment on varied grounds (Allan, 1991; Noller & Taylor, 1989; Schultz & Allan, 1987; Eastman, 1983) some positive impacts of such programs for participants are acknowledged (Eastman, 1983).

It is claimed that a growing number of parents are finding these programs acceptable and of value (Rodd & Holland, 1989). However, it is to be noted that a majority of parent education programs focus on younger children, and largely advise parents on child development and child management (O'Brien, 1991). Depending on the theoretical orientation of the program (Allan, 1989), either the child's troublesome behaviour or the parents's parenting technique is focus for change. The limitations of these approaches have been noted (Allan & Schultz, 1987). Such prescriptive programs would be considered inappropriate for parents who are having to contend with their teenagers' questioning of existing power relationships and authority in the home (Nicholson, 1986).

Alternative Perspective

Beyond stating that the wellbeing of parents and of young people living at home is greatly influenced by the quality of the parent-adolescent relationship, we have to recognise that this relationship does not exist in isolation, but rather is embedded in the dynamics of family life. Family life is a **system** (Callan & Noller, 1987; Firestone, 1986; Hartman & Laird, 1983) in which parents play a significant influencing role. The family, however, is further located in (and influenced by) a socio-structural milieu of other inter-related systems in the community (James & McIntyre, 1983).

To appreciate the family as a system, it would help to see it in terms of four important characteristics, namely, **connectedness, context, continuity and change**. All members in the family are dynamically *interconnected* by virtue of their interrelationships. Anything impinging upon one member or upon one relationship, invariably impacts on other family members and their relationships in the home. An

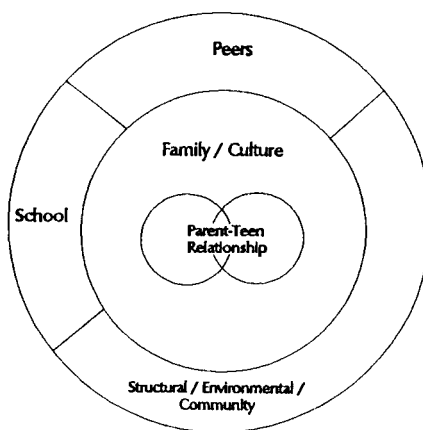
event in the family can only have meaning (or be fully understood) in *context*, and relative to both prevailing and historical circumstances. A current event or relationship will have extensions into the past and future by way of implications and influences. The family as a whole and the people and relationships that constitute it, are subject to ceaseless change, growth and possibilities.

What is being suggested here is that, while existing parent support programs are designed with different outlooks or world views, a group program developed according to the family systems approach is characteristically **existential** and **holistic**. What matters is the **current** parent-child relationship as lived and experienced by parents – the past and future being extensions of the present. The phenomenon of family life and parental relationships is complex, and more than the mere fusion of discrete entities.

The evolving parent-child relationship within the family is one of tension between the child's need for individuation and the need for identity relative to the family (Hartman & Laird, 1983: 82-87).

FIGURE 1:

Family Systems Approach Locating the parent-teen relationship



Flowing from the above consideration, one may conclude that a **family systems** approach could contribute very practically to parent group-programs (Eastman, 1983: 23-24).

Mindful of criticisms levelled at popular parent education programs with their diverse orientations, the *family systems* approach would have the following advantages:

- By focusing more on the social/family context, rather than on adolescent-related problems *per se* ("adolescence" is something that happens to a family, not just to an individual child' – Carter & McGoldrick, 1980:14) parental anger, frustration and attention will, hopefully, be deflected from notions of blame, failure and guilt. They will be less likely to clutch at purely intrapsychic causes for the problem, or look on 'experts' for solutions. This shift in emphasis will provide scope for parent empowerment and confidence in the possibility for unique outcomes to family strife;
- The approach promotes a broader social and structural view of health and wellbeing, thereby potentially offering parents an 'alternative vision' of issues in their lives (Allan, 1991);
- The approach has scope for not being overly flavoured by the dominant, essentially western beliefs and images of nuclear family life and hence, conversely, more responsive to varied socio-economic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds of parents as well as their differing values in child-rearing;
- The potential for worsening conflict between spouses over parenting styles and responsibilities will be greatly reduced by this approach, particularly when only one of the parents attends the group program;

The Springvale Parent Education Programs

Notions of empowerment, consumer participation and a social view of health are guiding principles in most programs and services at the Springvale Community Health Centre. The support-group programs conducted for Parents regularly are no exception. Services for young people is one strong focus of the Health Centre, and

the parent education programs are largely linked to this focus thereby according importance to supporting parents with teenage children.

It is vital that parent support, in reality, **complements** family relationships work with young people in peer group settings – and in conjoint groups of parents and their children, whenever it is possible to persuade parents and their teenage children to come together in a group!

The ideas and assumptions associated with the theory of *family systems* were found to be appealing since they appeared to be consistent and compatible with the notion of health enhancement through empowerment. Hence the approach was piloted in two group–programs relatively rigorously, and developed in subsequent programs. What follows is an account of our experience to date.

Features of the Program

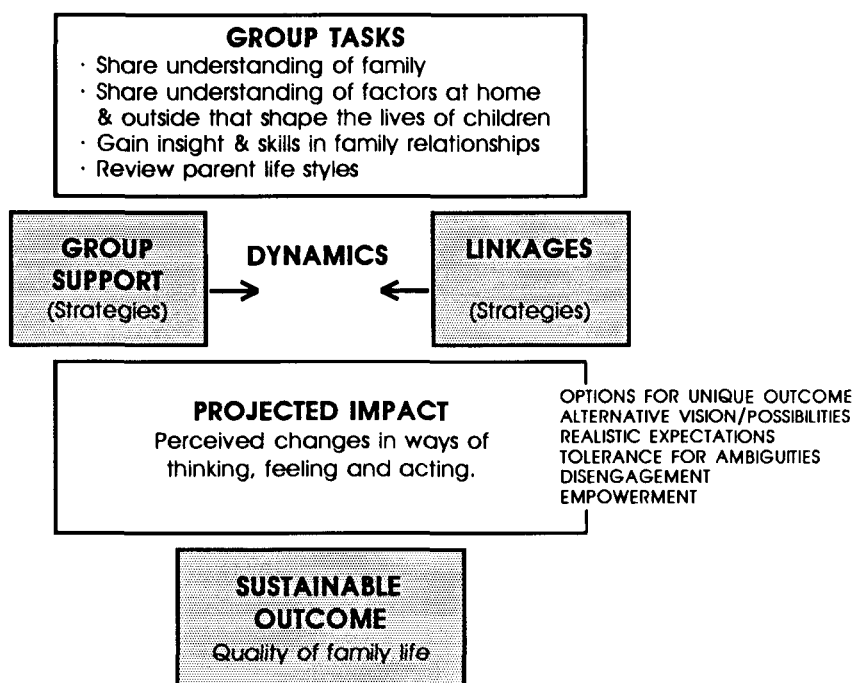
Each program comprised 90 minutes sessions – one session a week spread over eight consecutive weeks. The ninth session took the form of farewell party preceded by a group evaluation of the program. Most participants in a program usually opted to come together again on one further occasion, four months after saying good-bye, to talk about sustained gains or relapses in their family and personal lives.

The profile of one parent group which met in the evenings is of interest. There were twelve participants in all, one father and the rest mothers. Six were sole parents, including the one father in the group. Of the married women, one was in the throes of a divorce. Five were fully engaged in home duties. The paid employment positions held by participants were clerk, software engineer, travel consultant, teacher, furniture salesman and domestic cleaner. The average age of the group was thirty six. Eight were Australian born. They had adequate English language and literacy skills to function in the group. In total, they were parents to twenty-four children, fourteen of whom were over the age of eleven. Certainly, this group appeared to be mixed according to gender, class and ethnicity (Allan, 1989:97). In fact,

other programs have included a grandmother (participating because she was parenting a teenage grand-daughter), a couple from a blended family, and a low-functioning mum with a dysfunctional household. This picture, perhaps, offers some insight into the structure of the community in Springvale. The profile is also relevant in considering the appropriateness, in this instance, of the *family systems* approach and the related content of the program.

explicit in the perception of participants, and these drawn upon, to the extent possible, in activities. In particular, the links utilised were that between a participant in the group and her family members at home (through homework tasks), that between the participant's recollections of her own home life as a teenager, her present family-life and parenting style, and her visualisation of her children in the future in parenting roles themselves.

FIGURE 2: The Program Design



Each program pursues the following aspects:

1. Clarifies the focus of the program to participants (that is, empowering them as key agents in the family, rather than explicitly teaching them child management techniques), elicits some shared group goals and commitment, and engages the group in purposeful tasks.
2. Two interrelated strategies are deployed, namely, **group dynamics** and **dynamic linkages**. Through pair work, small group and other levels of interactions, the dynamics within the group is harnessed in a conscious way. Various linkages are made
3. There is ongoing monitoring of the impact of the program on the group, and on individual participants and their families, largely in the form of experienced and observed changes in the direction of more enabling thoughts/outlook, feelings, strategies and interactions.
4. An attempt is made some months after the program is over, to contact parents and gauge how sustained the benefits of participation has been for them.

Content of Sessions

Session content are selected in keeping with four mutually negotiated goals of the program, namely, assist in the group context to:

- **explore** the quality of the interactions between and among their family members, and search for ways to foster positive growth in family relationships;
- **gain** a shared understanding of the complex set of factors that shape the lives of children;
- **strengthen** their communication and relationships skills in the family;
- **strengthen** their wellbeing and personal life-styles.

An agenda is preplanned for each session, but then adjusted liberally according to the pace of the group and relative to issues and interests that emerge in the dynamic process.

Presenting Family Systems Themes in the Group

It is always a challenge to convey family systems concepts in tangible ways so that they are accessible and meaningful to lay people, or to parents who are described as 'vulnerable' by O'Brien (1991).

One strategy that appears to be relatively successful is to present key notions visually so that the related structure of the words assist in the process of memory and recall. What, however, gives each notion potency is the manner in which it is explicitly associated with an immediate purpose or theme. This linkage between key family systems notions and their related positive value to participants is illustrated in Table I.

Internalisation is facilitated by exposing participants consistently to these notions and themes as displayed on butcher paper, and by encouraging participants in the group-support program to explore and share issues and events in their own lives relative to these notions and theme.

TABLE 1

NOTION	THEME
1 Context	Things that happen in your life and in your family usually have a deeper meaning for you as you become more aware of the current or historical situation in which these things occur.
2 Change	The fact that life is never static; that you, your family and children are growing and changing, should give you hope that things could still improve for you and your family, as you work at it.
3 Continuity	Since family life is largely ongoing, despite hiccups of one sort or another, you should have the feeling that your life, as well, has some purpose and direction .
4 Connectedness	Just as the success, failure and conduct of a family member impact on others in the family, so too, you may be aware that the life of your family impacts on your friends and caring neighbours in subtle ways. This awareness ought to give you a sense of belonging . You do matter; you are not alone, and your family is not alone.
5 Communication	Family members have language to bond them. You can reach out and touch others. This thought should encourage you to feel that you have the power to get the most out of relationships.

Impact and Outcome

The observed and reported impact of the program on participants and their families is generally varied and mutually reinforcing. Session time is allocated for participants to share aspects that would have occurred between sessions. For instance, parents are required to use homework exercises as a way to engage their teenage children (and others at home), and in this way enhance the benefits of the group-support program. One homework exercise requires each participant to draw his/her family genogram on a large butcher-paper placed strategically in the family room when everyone is present - thereby obliquely attracting spouse and children to participate in the task. In a subsequent report-back, parents were unanimous in their view that this task was profoundly therapeutic for them.

Towards the end of each program, parents are generally required to consider the benefits of group participation in the form of perceived changes in their thinking, feelings and action. The following are examples of succinct statements which suggest interpersonal changes occurring in a family systems context.

Thinking

I thought I was the only one with problems. It's nice that I'm not alone in having particular problems.

Since coming here, I'm thinking more about the reasons for my children's behaviour.

Feelings

I used to feel anger towards my daughter in the mornings, but now I feel calmer and more controlled.

I feel comfortable with the group now when mentioning any problems; previously I didn't discuss my problems with anyone really.

Action

When I saw my son's globe (of the world) dismantled on the bed, my instant reaction was to be angry. But I stopped my angry feeling, asked myself why he might have done that and calmed down.

I used to make a fuss when my daughter was coming and going as she pleased. I've now learnt to accept, to let go.

Such statements as above are not often spontaneously asserted by vulnerable parents. Perhaps because of their poor self-esteem, they do not readily credit themselves as being capable of positive personal changes. Hence, these perceptions generally emerge in the empathic climate of small-group discussions, and then validated by the support group as a whole.

Spouses and children were invited to attend the last session of one recent program. There was amazing tolerance, disclosure and frank sharing in the session, notwithstanding the fact that the young people posed questions to the adults about why parents acted in certain ways towards their children. The anonymous questions were scrambled and drawn from a hat. But it appeared that parents had no difficulty recognising the authors of particular questions. One mother confessed being guilty to the question, 'Why does my mum only scold me when there is a fight between my big brother and myself?' The climax of this group encounter was a 'bring and share' dinner, the dynamics of which symbolised the recurrent ritual of reconciliation and hoped for harmony in the family system.

At the end of a program, participants are generally enthusiastic in wanting to meet again after a reasonable lapse of time. This will afford them an opportunity to share any relatively long-term outcomes of their group participation. One group decided to meet four months after the last session. In preparation for the follow-up meeting, parents were required to commit themselves to at least one realistic goal which they would pursue over the intervening four months. Two examples of such a goal were:

As a result of coming to the program, I have now decided to talk more to my friends about problems with my kids, and not rely only on my husband. Also, I am not going to worry about Ben growing away from me.

As a result of coming to the program, I have decided to spare some time for my own self, doing craft work which I love.

In this instance, a parent volunteered to arrange the follow-up. About half the parents attended. Several others tendered their apologies and sent their good wishes. A few failed to respond to the invitation. Most said they were happy to see progress in their goals. They felt better in themselves and more appreciated by others – even though their teenage children may not have changed much in attitude and habits. One parent came with a complimentary note from her spouse, thankful for the relative harmony at home and for the fact that both partners now had a chance to say their piece in an argument. Another parent surprised the group by coming in her Sunday best. Her problem was, she said, that she had never liked herself sufficiently. Hence, she had felt inadequate as a parent. She was wiser now, and her family noticed this.

Conclusion

Auerswald (1972:688) in sharing his perceptions of ecological approaches, asserts that the task of ecologists is 'creating change in the life view of individuals and groups'. It is precisely this that is being attempted in adopting family systems notions to empower parents, in a group setting, so that they may positively influence family life as significant agents of change. In this we are suggesting that, in fact, change in the family system may be facilitated as a by-product of individual change! The focus of the program content is essentially on facilitating personal growth, self-esteem and communication skills of participants – in other words, promoting their health and wellbeing. The complementary focus of the group process is to afford opportunities for individuals, collectively, to make links between their own experiences, as parents and individuals, and the broader social and material context influencing these experiences. For example, much tension is currently evident in the relationships between parents and young people in view of the recession, and largely arising from the fact that in many households the breadwinner and/or the young persons in the family are unemployed.

It is evident that, despite differences in class, gender, age and ethnicity, parents are generally able to appreciate and respond to the very different approach adopted in the Springvale group-support programs, and more particularly to the family systems notions weaved into the program content and related strategies.

The purpose of the program was certainly not to skill participants in techniques to better manage their teenage children. Despite this, there was evidence that parents who attended the group-support program developed more productive ways for handling some recurring and 'troublesome' problems. There was the parent who *discovered* that rather than screaming at her adolescent daughter almost daily to tidy up her bedroom, she could get by simply by closing the door to her daughter's room when visitors were expected. By studiously turning a deaf ear, another parent learnt not to get repeatedly drawn into arguments between her two teenage sons.

...change in the family system may be facilitated as a by-product of individual change!

These benefits, however, may be considered incidental to the larger aim of the program, which was to create the climate for participants to discover for themselves unique outcomes in their parenting roles; alternative visions and possibilities to enable them to enjoy a more meaningful and supportive relationship with their teenage children – thereby promoting wholesome family life as something which young people ought also to cherish and nurture. The warmth of the traditional hearth may linger only in memory and mythology, yet all too often, when the world about is bleak and stormy, it is to parents and family that many young people first turn for sustenance. But then whose responsibility is it to keep the home fires burning when rabid individualism is the fashion of the day? ♦

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